DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 879 CG 025 225

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TITLE	School Psychologists: Leaders for Change Building a Secure Future for Children. CASS Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services, Greensboro, NC.
SPONS AGENCY	Department of Education, Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDD-CG-94-07
PUB DATE	Apr 94
CONTRACT	RR93002004
NOTE	3p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adolescents; *Childhood Needs; Children; *Counselor Role; *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Futures (of Society); *School Psychologists
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest examines the role of school psychologists in improving educational opportunities for children and adolescents. A variety of issues that affect children and their ability to learn are discussed: widening social class differences and increases in the number of children living in poverty; changing value systems; family disintegration; lack of financial support for education; and children's exposure to violence in their neighborhoods, schools and in the media. The need for leadership in addressing these issues is emphasized and the role of school psychologists as leaders is advocated. A number of change strategies are discussed, including forming positive relationships between adults and children; using research to determine what works and what does not; developing policies and encouraging legislation that support children and education; getting involved in the system; adopting a process for change in the schools; offering needed special services to students; increasing the school psychologist's visibility; and developing plans to make a difference in the schools. The digest concludes by urging school psychologists to use their skills to help the country and school communities shift their priorities and build a secure future for children. (NB)

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ED 366 879

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

CASS DIGEST

April 1994

EDO-CG-94-07

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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School Psychologists: Leaders for Change Building a Secure Future for Children

Carol Kelly

Today's conditions for children and challenges faced by public school education require that we use our skills as leaders to assume a greater role in improving educational opportunities for children.

Issues

Our society is experiencing radical changes. Conditions for children are worse than ever. Social class differences are widening. More and more children are living in poverty -- currently one child in every four. In the past 15 years we have seen a substantial increase in national income; unfortunately the increase has been confined exclusively to the upper 50 to 60 percent of the population while people in the lower income brackets have no more to spend than they did 15 years ago. The cost, however, of maintaining the same standard of living has risen, leaving the population in far more dire straits than they were before. More and more children are coming to school unready to learn and are leaving school unprepared to successfully compete in the work force.

NASP Presidential Theme Digest

Changing value systems, family disintegration, and economics are forces that place quality of life and education for children far down on the list of priorities. Communities are finding it increasingly difficult to pass school bond elections. We see a lack of support from the government to serve children and families in need. Widespread neglect of young people at the federal, state, and community level lowers quality of education and of society itself.

Lack of financial support for education was rated as the number one issue facing schools by the American public on the recent Phi Delta Kappa Gallop poll. Our schools are more separate and unequal than ever. Education is in trouble financially throughout the nation -- community residents and taxpayers are unwilling to adjust their priorities and divert more money into providing a quality education for our children. We spend more on prisons and defense than on schools. Health care costs continue to escalate.

Pervasive violence in neighborhoods, schools, and media makes every child a victim. In some neighborhoods many children are so fearful that they stay home from school, falling further behind in their academics. Many young people lack the positive relationships with adults so necessary for development.

Demands of public education are increasing while our ability to meet those demands seems to be decreasing. Societal changes have changed expectations for schools and children who attend them. What our society needs to stay competitive is different than what it was in the past. It is essential to incorporate problem solving, communication, and human relation skills into the basic skills curriculum.

Today's children are compared to counterparts around the world. World class standards determine winners and losers.

Leadership

The fate of our country depends on our ability to successfully educate young people. Education is the key to reversing many trends. Changes in our education systems are necessary to catalyze this reversal. By the very nature of educational training and position in the school system, school psychologists are natural leaders. The literature reveals that effective leaders have good communication skills, ability to listen to others, human relation skills, conflict resolution skills, and decision making skills; effective leaders continue professional growth, and work with community resources. These characteristics also describe school psychologists.

As school psychologists, we help people change behavior, deal with loss, and develop courage to face new situations. These skills are transferable to a more global application as we help systems change to better meet the needs of children.

Strategies

Positive relationships. **To improve education, we need to find ways to involve more adults in the lives of children. Too many children are starved for healthy adult contact. We must make efforts to connect more adults with children and design our services so that we reach more children ourselves, thereby providing a wider support system for children.**

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Critical to children's success is parent involvement. The research clearly shows that achievement improves as parent involvement increases. Many parents desperately want their children to do well in school but don't know how to help them. School psychologists can facilitate this by providing such services as helping communities support parent involvement, working with teachers to improve relationships with parents, offering staff meetings on effective parent conferences, and presenting workshops for student teachers on parent communication.

Research. Many schools *have found* ways to boost achievement, yet too often, educators have not taken advantage of this knowledge. School psychologists must contribute to reform efforts by helping schools use knowledge and research so that schools do what works. This is a unique area where we can make strong contributions. Many reform effort simply ignore research. Help schools look for what works and give up on what doesn't.

Policy development. Quite often school psychologists are sufficiently engrossed in day to day operations that they are unaware of the impact that legislation can have on school services. At the national, state and local levels, we must make sure our country invests in children. We must build coalitions with other groups and develop strategies to influence policies that support children and education.

Getting involved. One of the best ways to exert positive leadership is by getting involved in *the system*. Establishing relationships with key decision-makers and opinion leaders allows us to more easily exert influence. To make a difference for greater numbers of children, it is essential that school psychologists begin volunteering to serve on reform and accountability committees and work closely with school leaders to develop goals and implement programs. Our services must be tied to overall district plans to improve education.

Change process. What schools lack is a process for accommodating change. A critical function school psychologists can serve is to work with teachers and principals in managing and acclimating the schools to change. Educators often focus on short-term solutions or feel overwhelmed and powerless during change. Many "shut the classroom door" and do nothing. As psychologists, we can educate our school communities about the change process. We can help them plan and know what to anticipate. We can help design strategies to reduce tensions, help people recognize success, encourage risk-taking, and help people have feelings of control. As schools move to site-based management, our skills in facilitating teamwork and training school faculty and staff in team concepts can be invaluable. Teams become more effective when they learn to apply group problem solving, conflict resolution, and decision making skills.

Special services. We must reexamine special education. We know there are too many children not getting the services they need. Effectiveness of "pull out" programs for many children has come into question as well as the time-consuming process of diagnosing and placing students. As with health reform, we need to preserve what's right and fix what's wrong. We now have profound opportunities to make positive changes. By keeping data on alternative services, working with our state departments of education in developing plans, and keeping up with the professional literature, we have the ability to find solutions for increasing numbers of children.

Visibility. If we are going to be leaders, we must make ourselves both valuable and visible. Unfortunately, adding value to children and to our schools is not enough. In the process, we must make ourselves known as a valuable part of the school faculty team. There is a tendency, in times of strained budgets, to reduce staff -- and typically, those staff whose positions are eliminated are those whose contributions are least known to the system and to the community. Building relationships with superintendents, school board members and community leaders, and helping them understand how we support their goals is an essential part of our role.

Leadership requires a plan. In addition to developing plans to make a difference in our own buildings we must link with colleagues to develop district and state association plans. Many of today's issues are ones we can address and that will make us more valuable to the schools and to the children.

Conclusion

There are major shifts in our society. Our children face unprecedented challenges. Leadership is desperately needed that can provide strategies to address issues and remove barriers that are preventing far too many children from achieving all that they can.

School psychologists are urged to use their skills to help our country and school communities shift their priorities and build a secure future for children.

Carol Kelly, Ph.D., is a school psychologist in Jefferson County, Colorado and President of the National Association of School Psychologists, 1993-1994.

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This publication was funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ERIC/CASS.